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# homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT  
OF AGRICULTURE

U. S. Department of Agriculture

WEDNESDAY, Nov. 11, 1942

SUBJECT: "FEATHERS FOR FIGHTERS." Information from poultry experts of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Feathers are flying these days. The feather industry is booming. And even the lowly chicken feather along with the waterfowl feather is doing its bit in the war effort. Because feathers are light in weight yet warm and soft--because they are ideal insulators, they have extra value in wartime. Our armed forces are using feathers by the hundreds of tons for sleeping bags, quilts, hospital pillows, suits for aviators in the cold of high altitudes, and for other products that must be light, warm and soft. Waterfowl feathers are in special demand. You see, ducks and geese really have it over chickens when it comes to feathers. To begin with, ducks and geese have an undercoat of down, one of the softest, lightest and warmest materials on earth. And then, ducks and geese have curly feathers while chickens have flat feathers. Curly feathers give more warmth because they can hold in more spaces of still air for insulation. Curly feathers have more spring, too, and don't lump or pack together as flat feathers may.

Down makes the filling for sleeping bags for our soldiers in Arctic climates. The bag covers are of synthetic fabric tightly woven so the down won't work through. The bags are sewed in tufts or pockets that hold the down. Soldiers spread these sleeping bags on a tarpaulin or on the snow and climb into them "raw." The down filling is so warm that they sleep comfortably even when the temperature drops to 40 below. Yet the bag is so light a soldier can carry it as part of his regular equipment. By the way, the story goes that one reason the Russian soldiers stood last winter better than the Germans is that they had down sleeping bags, and their coats had down linings. Feather buyers were not able to import any down from



Russia from a number of years before the war. Apparently the Russians were building up a great stock of down for the time their soldiers would need it.

Our armed forces use not only down but the coarser duck and goose feathers. These feathers are soft and have plenty of spring so they make comfortable, durable hospital pillows for the sick and wounded. Chicken feathers wouldn't do so well because they become lumpy under hard hospital usage. But chicken feathers by the millions of pounds go into pillows for use in barracks and on board ships.

And chicken feathers are stuffing the upholstery and pillows for civilians these days. The Government has first call on waterfowl feathers and down. So down is out for civilians for the duration. Before the war this country imported millions of pounds of down from Hungary, Poland, and China. When this supply was cut off, we had to turn to our own birds to supply the demand. And our ducks and geese can supply only enough for our armed forces. But if you are thinking of turning in your old down quilt to the Government to keep the boys in uniform warm--don't. Government specifications call for new feathers only--clean, never-used feathers. Down loses some of its resiliency with use. But you can find a market for new duck and goose feathers. You can easily sell that bag of down and fine waterfowl feathers you've been saving for your daughter's trousseau.

There is no shortage of chicken feathers. Just the contrary. Quantities of chicken feathers go to waste every year. The Nation's chickens produce about 100 million pounds of feathers every year, but only about 15 or 20 million pounds get used. The shortage of down and waterfowl feathers may put more of these waste chicken feathers to use before the war is over. Some manufacturers are now stripping the soft part of the feather from the quill and curling it to pinchhit for down.

Most of the 15 or 20 million pounds of feathers that are used come from the big poultry dressing plants. Especially at this time of year millions of birds are traveling by rail and truck to the great poultry markets. The commercial packers





kill and pluck them, often wash the feathers, too, or send them to a feather laundry. As they come off the chickens the feathers are wet, dirty and stained. After a shampoo and drying they go in great bags to the feather processors. The processors wash them with chemicals, steam, dry, disinfect, sort and even curl them. Then they are ready to stuff pillows or upholstery.

The feather industry is interested in new ways to use chicken feathers. One of the new products on the market is a quilt of curled chicken feathers. A feather quilt is not as light as a down quilt, of course. But it is lighter and warmer than most other coverings. A light feather quilt weighing about 7 pounds is equal in warmth to 2 or 3 heavy wool blankets. By the way, any smart housewife on the farm could use the chicken feathers that always go to waste to make light warm bed covering for her family. Be sure the feathers are clean, of course. And use the softer feathers. Make the cover of sateen or some other closely woven material that won't let the feathers work through.

All this fuss about feathers is also a tipoff to the housewife to care for the feather articles she has. Look after pillows, down quilts, even a feather-bed, if you have one. Keep them clean and protected from moths. You'll find directions for washing pillows in free bulletin on home laundry which you can order from the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. Down quilts with silk or rayon covers are best dry cleaned. But they won't need cleaning often if you sun, air and fluff them up every now and then. Lay them on top of the bed; don't waste the down by tucking under the mattress.

